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## In basketball, and life, race has influence

### Joseph Price and Justin Wolfers / Guest Column

In a recent study, we examined the degree to which there is an own-race bias among referees in the National Basketball Association. We find that players earn up to 4 percent more fouls and score up to 2 1/2 percent fewer points when there are three referees of the opposite race compared with three referees of their own race. The own-race bias is large enough that the probability of a team winning is noticeably affected by the racial mix of the officials assigned to the game.

Our study was reported by The New York Times and set of a flurry of media attention including radio coverage by NPR and television coverage by CNN, ABC, ESPN and others. The NBA was quick to denounce our study and commission its own study to prove we were wrong. Other media commentators were quick to dismiss our work. Bob Ryan of The Boston Globe said, "They have facts that aren't facts. This study is a needless distraction." Charles Barkley said our study was "irresponsible and asinine." LeBron James called us stupid. Kobe Bryant called us wrong.

What was often missed in the media reporting was that our study was never meant to be about basketball. Our study is about the larger issue of implicit stereotypes, which extend beyond the sports arena and even beyond just

racial issues. These stereotypes extend to gender, nationality, religious affiliation and likely many other personal characteristics. We used basketball data because it provided an ideal setting in which to test a broader social phenomenon.

The advantage of the NBA data is that it is publicly available and contains such detailed information that we

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can rule out many alternative explanations for the bias we observe. We also have nearly random assignment of referees to each game providing an experiment-like setting in which to test for biases. Finally, the size of our dataset and the repeated interactions between players and referees allow us to make reasonably precise inferences.

Suppose that we had similarly detailed data for our local schools. We might want to know whether black students are treated differently (relative to white students) by white teachers relative to black teachers. Teachers often face similar instant response decisions when deciding who to call on in class, while grading papers or whom to discipline. All of these small subtle differences could potentially lead to racial (or gender) differences in how well students do in school, which is something that could be tested.

While there is danger in extrapolating our results to other settings, our real hope is that our study might motivate researchers to test for implicit biases in these other more important settings. For instance, just as referees have to evaluate whether or not a foul occurred, teachers must decide whether a student's actions are deserving of disciplinary action, customers decide whether or not to trust proprietors, firms decide whom to hire, fire or promote, judges decide whom to sentence, and officers decide not only whom to arrest, but also make split-second judgments as to whether a suspect is reaching for his gun or his wallet.

Future research on implicit biases in more important settings is going to require the cooperation of school districts, police departments, large employers and other organizations. These organizations often have the type of detailed data needed to test for own-group biases. We were lucky that avid sports fans had posted years of sports data on the Internet, making our analysis possible. In our paper we reference other research that has dealt with these similar issues in arrest rates, vehicle searches and hiring decisions. There are still clearly many areas in which to test for the type of own-race bias we detect in the NBA.

We hope future researchers will be more successful in eliciting the cooperation of organizations than we were with the NBA, especially since it is these organizations that stand to benefit the most from rooting out incorrect stereotypes.

***Joseph Price is a graduate student at Cornell University. Justin Wolfers is an economics professor at the University of Pennsylvania.***

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